

week with six state attorneys general—four Democrats and two Republicans—who were in Washington for a professional conference. Their theme was one I had heard before, not just from social workers, academics and supposed bleeding-heart liberals but from police chiefs, prosecutors and other hard-nosed denizens of the criminal justice system.

It is the irrefutable evidence that the most effective anti-crime strategies—and the least expensive—are early childhood education, after-school programs and serious mentoring of youngsters who otherwise are almost certainly fated to be dropouts, delinquents and, yes, prison inmates.

Larry Long, the South Dakota attorney general and a 30-year career prosecutor, put it this way. "I can tell you that by the time kids of 12 or 14 are brought into the juvenile justice system, they are lost. All I can do is warehouse them—at huge expense. The sooner and faster we reach kids, the better the chance of their being saved."

Long and his counterparts from Colorado, Delaware, Maine, Montana and New Mexico described what they are doing to reach vulnerable youngsters—especially those being raised by single mothers still in their teens—and to help those parents stabilize lives often blighted by drugs or other addictions. But they also confirmed that many of their initiatives are on the chopping block, as states struggle with declining revenue and runaway health care costs for the elderly.

"These are proven programs that work," said Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath, "but our budget crisis is so severe we may not be able to meet the federal matching requirement"—the dollars a state must put up to qualify for a grant from Washington.

That is why they express such dismay at what they are hearing out of the Washington budget proceedings. The briefing paper that all the state law enforcement officials were given by the advocacy group Fight Crime: Invest in Kids spelled out some of the cuts included in the Bush budget.

Funds for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school program would be cut from \$1 billion to \$600 million. The memo to the attorneys general says that cutback would take a half-million children each year out of a those centers, even though unsupervised youngsters make the hours from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. the peak time for serious and violent juvenile crime.

The Bush budget increases Head Start funding by \$148 million, just about enough to keep pace with inflation, but the program now serves only six out of 10 preschoolers who are eligible. Several other early childhood block grants and programs are ticketed for reduction or elimination.

The picture is similar for other Justice Department and Education Department program aimed at preventing juvenile delinquency.

"This is so shortsighted," said Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe. "For \$300 billion, one-fifth the [10-year] cost of the new tax cut, we could fully fund all of these programs" for the next decade.

That kind of investment would not only save lives, the attorneys general said. It would save money. "We are spending \$75,000 a year every time we incarcerate someone under 18," said Delaware Attorney General Jane Brady. "We have to jail them, educate them, counsel them and try to rehabilitate them. It would be so much better to help them while they are young."

It's another example of the long-term costs will incur today's budget decisions.

[From the Washington Post, Mar. 7, 2003]

THE 3 TO 6 GAP

(By E.J. Dionne, Jr.)

The phrase "balancing work and family" is abstract. Here's the concrete part: Kids' school schedules are out of sync with their parents' work schedules. It is plain dumb that from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, we just let kids loose.

Yes, many families make heroic efforts to deal with this problem. But many others—especially in households that desperately need two incomes—are put in a terrible dilemma. Filling the 3 to 6 gap is one of our most urgent social needs, a point made regularly by law enforcement officials.

Some politicians understand it, too. "After-school programs keep kids safe, help working families and improve academic achievements," said the most prominent one of them all. "They engage students in service and ensure that youth have access to anti-substance abuse programs. For America's working parents, they provide the confidence that their children are well cared for after the school day ends."

Excellent points. President Bush made them in a letter he wrote on Oct. 4, 2002, to a group called the Afterschool Alliance. So why, exactly, has the president proposed to cut federal spending on after-school care by 40 percent? Under Bush's budget, federal spending on 21st Century Community Learning Centers would drop from \$1 billion this year to \$600 million next year.

Rep. George Miller, a California Democrat who worked with Bush on the education bill, notes that the program now covers about 1.5 million kids. The program's advocates estimate that at least 500,000 would be affected by the cut.

This cut, alas, perfectly embodies what's wrong with the way this administration is doing business. The dissonance between the president's moderate, compassionate words and his spending priorities is jarring.

Moreover, the federal government is pulling away from a problem at exactly the moment when giant budget deficits are forcing states to do less themselves. In Maryland, for example, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a Republican, has proposed cutting the Maryland After School Opportunity Fund in half, from \$10 million to \$5 million. Afterschool Alliance reports similar cuts in at least four other states and expects more to follow.

Bush speaks constantly of making it easier for faith-based groups to get federal funds. The 21st Century program was opened to such organizations last year. Does it help faith-based groups to let them into the program and then dry up the funding?

Miller is not alone in suspecting that this program was vulnerable because it happened to be one of former president Bill Clinton's more popular initiatives. "There's obviously been a search-and-destroy mission against anything that was Clinton," he says.

Oh, yes, Bush says we have to make these hard budget choices, but he has refused to put a price tag on the war with Iraq (it could easily run to \$100 billion) and insists we need his huge tax cuts for the wealthy. Let's see: We have to cut \$400 million from after-school program to pay for the elimination of the dividends tax, which will eventually cost the government \$50 billion a year in revenue?

Most remarkable, the administration has justified this cut as good government. It cites a recent study by Mathematica Policy Research showing, as the administration's budget documents put it, that "the centers funded in the program's first three years are not providing substantial academic content and do not appear to have a positive impact on students' behavior."

The Mathematica study did find some positive effects from the program, and some of

its criticisms were disputed by after school advocates. But let's assume that the report was sound and that these programs would do well to beef up their academic content. That's still no excuse for using a single report as a rationale for cutting the federal government's commitment to helping kids between the hours of 3 and 6. We need to build on the after-school experience, not retreat. And, by the way, does the administration have one standard for social programs—a little bad news and they're slashed—and another for tax cuts and, say, missile defense?

To challenge these cutbacks, I nominate a good Republican known as The Terminator. Last fall, Arnold Schwarzenegger led the fight for Proposition 49 in California, a ballot measure that will eventually provide about \$430 million for after-school programs. It passed with 57 percent of the vote. "My hope is that, as goes California, so goes the rest of the nation," he declared. Arnold, where your priorities are concerned, your president is saying, "Hasta la vista, baby."

[From the New York Times, Feb. 13, 2003]

HEAVY LIFTING

(By Bob Herbert)

He's at it again.

President Bush traveled to Nashville on Monday to talk, among other things, about compassion, which is a topic this president probably should leave alone. Mr. Bush's idea of compassion tends to send a shiver of dread through those who are disadvantaged.

But there he was in Nashville at the National Religious Broadcasters convention, exhorting his audience to "rally the armies of compassion so that we can change America one heart, one soul at a time."

The president said religious organizations had a responsibility to assist the poor and those who are suffering, and to help alleviate the "artificial divisions" of race and economics.

"I welcome faith to help solve the nation's deepest problems," he said.

If religious leaders take up the challenge they will have to do some awfully heavy lifting, because Mr. Bush's domestic policies—instead of easing suffering—are all but guaranteed to provide an ever-swelling stream of people in need of help.

Everywhere you turn, support programs for the poor, the ill, the disabled and the elderly are under attack. Children's services are being battered. As Mr. Bush smiles and talks about compassion, funding for programs large and small is being squeezed, cut back, eliminated.

The day after, Mr. Bush's upbeat speech to the religious broadcasters, The Times's Robert Pear revealed that the administration was proposing a change in federal law that would result in rent increases for thousands of poor people receiving housing aid.

The administration has proposed a restructuring of Medicare that would curtail, rather than enhance, delivery of health services to the elderly.

In the \$2.2 trillion budget that Mr. Bush sent to Congress last week was an unconscionable proposal that would eliminate after-school programs for 500,000 children. In the arena of bad ideas, that one's a champion. It would result not just in hardship, but tragedy. For one thing, the peak hours for juvenile crime are 3 p.m. to 8 p.m., with the biggest, most dangerous burst coming in the very first hour after school. That is also the time of day in which most teenage girls become pregnant.

Mr. Bush has proposed cuts in juvenile delinquency programs, public housing assistance, children's health insurance and on and on. He's even undermined the funding for his